

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

EPISCOPAL CHURCH CENTER • 815 SECOND AVENUE • NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10017

Walter H. Boyd, Press Officer

Wm. Drew Dearnaley, Assistant Press Officer

Telephone: (212) 867-8400

80096

March 20, 1980

ECUMENISTS SENSE
LACK OF SUPPORT

By The Rev. Donald E. Becker

SEATTLE -- An attitude survey that was circulated in the National Workshop on Christian Unity was answered by about half of the 300 unity officers and participants from the dozen denominations represented here in the meeting held from March 10-13.

In general, participants in the Workshop have positive feelings about the future of the ecumenical movement but they do have doubts as to whether national church officials share their views and even greater doubts about the commitment of pastors and lay persons.

Some 84 percent said that they personally felt positively about the ecumenical movement and its future.

Only 55 percent could say the same for national church leaders, with 45 percent of those responding to the query on leadership response feeling that denominational executives were either apathetic or negative towards Christian unity.

Somewhat more than a third, 36 percent, felt lay persons were positive but only 20 percent believed that local pastors were in tune with the ecumenical efforts.

As to education of church people, the Workshop participants strongly agreed (67 percent) that local experiences in various kinds of unity are the best means for bringing to all people the fact that ecumenism is required by God and is vital to mission.

The largest number of responders were Episcopalians and Roman Catholics. About a fourth of the survey respondents were Roman Catholic; about a third were Episcopalians; and about a sixth were United Methodists.

Of those answering the survey, 83 percent were male; 80 percent were clergy; and the average age was 48.

Obedience to the Gospel was cited as the principal justification for Christian unity efforts. The Workshop members linked that response mainly to Christ's prayer in John 17, that his followers might be one.

While this was the feeling -- obedience to the Gospel mandate -- many saw "mission" as the most powerful reason in the eyes of the people in the pews.

On where the emphasis of the ecumenical movement should be -- with councils of churches; actual union of churches; two-way conversations; joint action task forces -- all got significant support.

But what is the ultimate goal? A full 40 percent believe it is in a single Eucharistic fellowship -- a regular "sharing the Lord's Supper together." Another 34 percent see it in the physical uniting of churches and this evidenced in numerous study sections and seminars where physical unity, sharing of the Eucharist, and joint task forces, ran closely together as present preferred means of ecumenical action.

Included in the Workshop were diocesan or regional ecumenical officers, denominational ecumenical officers, persons serving in ecumenical posts, and interested pastors and lay persons.

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